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# Highly Interesting Paper Read at Historical Society Meeting by Alfred Holt Stone

## "THE FUNCTIONS OF A LOCAL HISTORICAL SOCIETY"

The sixth regular meeting of the Washington County Historical Association was held at the usual time and place on Monday, August 1st, 1910.

Capt. W. W. Stone was the presiding officer, Miss Anna Robb, secretary pro tem. All business matters to come before the Association having been attended to, the meeting was placed in the hands of Mr. Henry T. Ireys, the chairman of the programme committee.

Mr. Ireys, in a few select words introduced Mr. Alfred Holt Stone, the chairman of the Historical Research Committee and the orator for the evening, who had selected for his topic "The Functions of a Local Historical Society."

Mr. Stone was listened to with deep interest and his words of wisdom will direct the organization into fruitful fields of research. We are pleased to print the address under its title.

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### "THE FUNCTIONS OF A LOCAL HISTORICAL SOCIETY."

"It is the true office of history to represent the events themselves together with the counsels, and to leave the observations and conclusions thereupon to the liberty and faculty of every man's judgment."

This dictum of Lord Bacon may be said to present the finally accepted rule for the proper writing of history according to the so-called scientific method. It is an old controversy, this as to how history should be narrated. On the one hand we have the advocates of what may be called the "attractive" method, as exemplified in the brilliant writings of Carlyle and Macauley, while the other side has contended for a severely plain presentation of almost barren facts. The latter have been designated the "Dry-as-dust" school of historians. Those thus ridiculed have retorted by declaring, and all but proving, that Macauley was only a wonderfully gifted essayist, by no stretch of the imagination entitled to rank as a historian, and that Carlyle's "History of the French Revolution" is not a history and tells us very little about the French Revolution. The ablest modern exponent of the popular school of history writing was the late John Fiske. I have heard it said that Fiske would walk into a library and ask for the best things they had on the subject in which he was for the moment interested—have them sent to his desk, and produce a history while another man was trying to determine accurately a disputed date. I have a friend who for the past fifteen years has averaged about seven hours of hard work every day, including Sundays, on a history not a line of which has yet appeared. Gibbon spent more than twenty years in writing the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire.

But this has to do with the methods and function of the historian. I have referred to the controversy only to emphasize the truth that in the work in which you are engaged you have a field in which the largest measure of usefulness need be impaired by no bickerings or questionings as to methods. purposes, means or ends. By common consent, the place of the local historical society is secure in the general scheme of developing and permanently recording the facts of American history. The value and importance of the work of such an organization, however, depend upon a proper appreciation of its functions, and the faithful prosecution of a worthy purpose. It is valuable or worthless—as we ourselves shall render it.

One of the common stumbling blocks to the successful prosecution of all local historical work is a failure of the sense of proportion. We are usually in danger both of magnifying unimportant things and of ignoring or failing to appreciate matters of genuine historical interest and concern. Of the two, however, I do not hesitate to lay the greater stress upon the danger of undervaluation. American history is simply a record of the collective experiences of the American people. The record of the whole cannot be made up without a record of its constituent parts. And the latter will inevitably fall far short of completeness if we fail to realize the significance and importance of much in our local history which close contact is apt to cause us to pass by as not worth serious consideration. One of the great fundamentals of all history is the movement of population—whether in great waves, across oceans and continents, or in smaller streams through smaller areas. This should be one of the first things to arrest your attention. How was our county settled? From what states and localities came its pioneers? What influences determined their movement in this direction? What means of transportation did they employ in reaching here? How did they live on the way? What did they bring with them? Why did they select this name and that for their plantations and villages, their lakes and streams? These questions are simple, but they are historically vital. Unless we are to answer them, we would as well go out of existence at once, or call our organization by some other name.

In recent years there has been a pronounced reaction against the practice of subordinating all history to a consideration of politics and wars. Both here and in the old country historians are more and more turning to a study of the lives of people—of their actual daily movements, of what they did how they lived, what they ate and wore, the character of houses they occupied, the books they read, the games they played—all the hundred things which go to make up the sum total of human life, and without a knowledge of which history becomes a barren record. More than in any other of the older sections of the country have we ignored these things in the Southern states. The libraries of the Eastern, New England and older Western States are filled with the chronicles of their counties and towns. We have made a lot of history in the South, but we have been criminally negligent in preserving an authentic and permanent record of it. A fairly intimate acquaintance with, and a candid recognition of, our short-comings in this regard, have smothered any sympathy I might otherwise have with the too frequent complaint that our history has been unfairly written by outsiders. If we refuse to provide the material for writing it ourselves, and preserve no written record of our own history, then we have only ourselves to blame if it is not written to suit us. Do not understand me to include the writing of history among the functions of this society, or of any other historical association. The whole basis of written history is expressed in the one word 'sources''. The chief, in fact the one really legitimate, function of such an organization as ours, is the collection and preservation of the source material out of which history may be written. This should be borne in mind in the preparation of every paper presented here which purports to deal with historical matter. The ideal for such papers is a narration of facts so carefully made that the most destructive critic shall be unable to pick a flaw in their statement. This ideal may be not often attained, but it should none the less be striven for. Tradition may, or may not, be history—according to the fidelity with which it transmits facts. In committing either traditions or reminiscences to permanent form the greatest care should be exercised to test the accuracy of what is written, in order that every such paper may constitute a reliable source of facts for future historical use. And, regardless of the degree of care which may be exercised, a resort to family or local tradition for historical knowledge is justified only in the absence of all documentary sources of information. I would like very much to know just what our early settlers brought with them—particularly in the way of books and furniture. An oral statement by such a settler would be valuable, if one were living—notwithstanding the frailty of human memory. Such a statement, even at second or third hand, when given as a family tradition by a child or grandchild, would have its value also. But far above any such verbal statement or tradition, in historical sanctity, would rank a letter from our settler, say to relatives in Kentucky, South Carolina or Virginia, announcing his safe arrival in the new country and telling of the things which he brought and of what he lost on the way.

This suggests another function of this society—namely, to serve as a repository for original historical material. In a very important sense every paper, prepared as has been suggested, becomes a source of authoritative information in the custody of the society. A constant effort should be made to collect such documentary material as letters, diaries, old newspapers, etc. As we grow older an occasional volume should be published, to put into more accessible form the accummulations of the association. A library also is with in the range of future possibilities, and is a usual and necessary feature of such work as we have undertaken.

One of the most helpful and stimulating teachers of history we have had in America was the late Herbert B. Adams, of Johns Hopkins. To his work and influence historians are largely indebted for the numerous monographs on local history which have been produced by advanced students during the past twenty-five years. One great secret of Prof. Adams' success was his ability to arouse interest and enthusiasm in local subjects, on the part of those whom he taught. In fact this seems to me to have been among the first of his achievements. I am not sure that I would not place this, for the present at least, first among the functions of this society—to arouse an active and intelligent interest among our people in matters of history peculiar to ourselves and our community. This is fundamental. Without such interest, and the co-operative effort which it alone would make possible, but little substantial progress can be made. Once having done this, however, we may reasonably hope for permanently valuable results. In the effort to excite this interest, I am willing to hazard a guess that the chief difficulty will be that of convincing the public that we really have a local history worth the telling. Along this line let me make a few suggestions. I am acquainted with many Southern localities which possess a rare historical charm for the historically minded man; such, for example, as the old lowland parish section of South Carolina, with its centre in Charleston; the Virginia "Peninsular", that wonderfully interesting region which lies between the York and the James; and the country about Natchez, inseparably associated with the early history of the Southwest, and rich in historic memories of Spanish, English, Indian and pioneer intrigue and adventure. These are older and more important centres of historical interest than ours. But, and I make the statement deliberately, I know of no region in the South which affords a better field for definitely valuable studies of certain very important concrete subjects which possess a broad appeal to students of American history, than is afforded right here at home. And I may say just here that I have in mind the territory surrounding us—the entire so-called Delta section of the State. I would not by any means confine either the activities or membership of the association to the county after which it is named.

The Southern States have had a unique history. A very brief analysis will indicate the factors which have influenced our history along peculiar lines, and have served to differentiate its course and development from that of the rest of the country. Modern history is taking much more into account the factor of physiography than was formerly the case. Under this general designation are included climate, rainfall, the character of the soil, the course and character of streams, the presence or absence of mountain ranges, the nature of local plant life. These simple things are in truth the very origin and foundation of the important differences between widely separated countries and between different parts of the same country. If Massachusetts had an average rainfall of some sixty inches, with long, hot summers and practically no real winter, coupled with a soil originally fertile—it is venturing nothing to say that slavery would have persisted there, instead of gradually disappearing. If, on the other hand, Mississippi had the soil and climate of Massachusetts, the institution of slavery could never have gained a permanent foothold in the State. This is but another way of saying that if the physiographic conditions of the country along the upper Atlantic seaboard had been peculiarly adapted to the production of the great semi-tropical agricultural staples, such as indigo, rice, tobacco, cotton and sugar, and the physical environment of the South Atlantic region had been hostile to those crops, then they would have dominated the development and history of the former, instead of the latter, section. There is no sanctity inherent in geographic names. Historians are coming more and more to realize the importance of the economic aspects of history, and this carries with it an inevitable realization of the importance of these influences which shape a people's economic life. And this in turn leads to a broader and more sympathetic interpretation of history than would otherwise be possible, for it enables men to account for differences between themselves and others upon natural, rather than artificial grounds. This growing appreciation of the force of physical considerations in history has altered, within the past decade and a half, the traditional attitude of the New England historian toward the study of the most vital of all the controversial questions of American history—the institution of slavery. And it has led to an increasing and a genuinely sympathetic interest in that branch of American history which it is now recognized is peculiarly "Southern" only through force of natural causes, rather than because of the perversity or caprice of the people who chance to dwell in the region known as "the South".

Southern historical associations are responding to this interest by rendering available a mass of material the value of which is recognized throughout the country. But the work thus far has been done mainly by State organizations, and there is a great field of usefulnesss open to local societies. In fact, the latter, with a smaller, more compact membership, and a smaller territory to explore, can render a service never likely to be performed by the larger body. There need be no danger of conflict between the two. In fact there should be, and I would urge, active co-operation between this society and the State institution. The smaller the unit about which we have definite historical knowledge, the more exact will be our knowledge of a given whole. With all deference to those who have attempted to write histories of Mississippi—we shall never have a real history of the State until we shall have done a great deal more local historical work than has thus far been accomplished. Then too, along certain important lines the history of a county, or of a county group, or of institutions within a county, may epitomize the history of an entire State or section. And this brings me back to what I had in mind in saying that this county afforded a fine field for the study of certain concrete subjects local in character, but of much more than local concern. It was in connection with the growing interest in economic history, and I had particularly in view the development of the distinctive aspect of Southern economic life known as the plantation system. A history of the opening, developing, operation, successes and failures of the plantations of this county would throw a flood of light upon the history of the South. We have been surfeited with politics and wars. The world would like to know how we lived when we were not fighting or running for office. A series of papers, telling with accuracy and care the whole story of our plantation life, would be a contribution of distinct value to American history—for it would help to close a gap in the history of the nation. There need be no fear of exhausting the subject. Such papers as I have in mind would tell us how and why the original and subsequent planters came to this territory; how their property here was acquired; of what sized tracts it was composed; how it was cleared for cultivation; all the details of its operation. This would cover the entire range of the economic and social life of the county. It would include a history of slave prices, of how slaves were handled and cared for, of the number required to carry on plantation operations, of the extent and nature of their domestic and industrial training, of the differences between house servants and field hands, of their housing, their dress, their education, their amusements, discipline and religious life. It would trace the origin, development and ramifications of the factorage system of financing plantation operations and of handling plantation products—a system which identified the Southern colonies much more closely with the West Indies, in their economic life, than with the American colonies in New England, and which has influenced Southern history to a degree not dreamed of by those who have not investigated it. Nor should such a history stop with the outbreak of the Civil War. One of the most difficult phases of our history is that which deals with the domestic life of our people during the war. We know all about the battles that were fought and a good deal about the political administration of the State and Confederate governments. But, save for a few recently published diaries and reminiscensces, we know little or nothing about the intimate, daily life of those who lived at home during the progress of the struggle. And the same is true of the early post bellum period, say 1865 to 1880. We have been so much absorbed with the political side of reconstruction that we have forgotten that people did not live on politics alone during that period. It is today a practical impossibility for the student of history to lay his hands on a single collection of material which will

(Continued on Page Eight.)

I am writing a history of Colonial Holidays / Mrs. Rowland